

2017

Mooroopna Women Gathering

Action Research

Project Story – a group of women who were in similar circumstances found the support and encouragement they needed, with each other – we invite you to read the project story



WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST

Challenging inequity, embracing diversity.

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and North East Victoria.

Further copies of this report are available from:

Women's Health Goulburn North East

PO Box 853 Wangaratta 3677

Phone: 03 5722 3009

Fax: 03 5722 3020

Email: whealth@whealth.com.au

Web: www.whealth.com.au

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Report collated by Jess Elsworth and Julie Tyler

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Executive Summary

What is known from previous 'Women Gathering after Fires' projects, is the positive outcome of women getting together. In the town of Mooroopna a group of women were seeking a group where they could gain skills to support each other through difficult times. Two facilitators collaborated to support the group of women over a year period, with a range of trainings in areas they identified. The reflective evaluation indicated the success of this group. The women all experienced personal growth, developed positive and supportive friendships and gained knowledge and skills. They all valued being a part of the group. Outcomes of this group include, one of the women pursuing study, two of the women gaining employment and two women taking on the facilitation of the group.

'All of us are very supportive of one another, everyone's individual and has different needs, can express themselves in a different way, everyone listens respectfully and cares, and feels cared about'

'I've made peace with some of my demons for myself as a result of this group, the family violence stuff and self-identity, I can talk about it without going to pieces, and this group gave me the opportunity to do that'

'I'm doing aged care, just expanding myself, growth, personal growth, finding myself. I'm actually finding myself which I thought I wouldn't say 8 years ago, or 5 years ago. Definitely as a result of this group'

Key Words

Community, family violence, support, women gathering, gender

The Storyteller

Ros, (DHHS) Department of Health and Human Services (Goulburn) and Julie, (WHGNE) Women's Health Goulburn North East, the facilitators of the Mooroopna women's group

What is the Story About?

What is known from previous projects (Women Gathering After Fires) is the positive outcome of women getting together. In the community of Mooroopna, a group of women who were part of the Shepparton Women's Employment Program (SWEP) were in similar circumstances and found it difficult to find support they needed during difficult times. The facilitators worked with the women to build their capacity to support each other, rather than rely and depend on health professionals. The project took a community development approach combined with the principles of the women's gathering model. The initial idea was to have a number of workshops with women over a short period, but resulted in 22 meetings. The project continued for over a year (2015-16) and the process provided valuable learnings for both the women and the facilitators. This was clear from the reflections held with the women and with the facilitators.

Why was the Project Initiated?

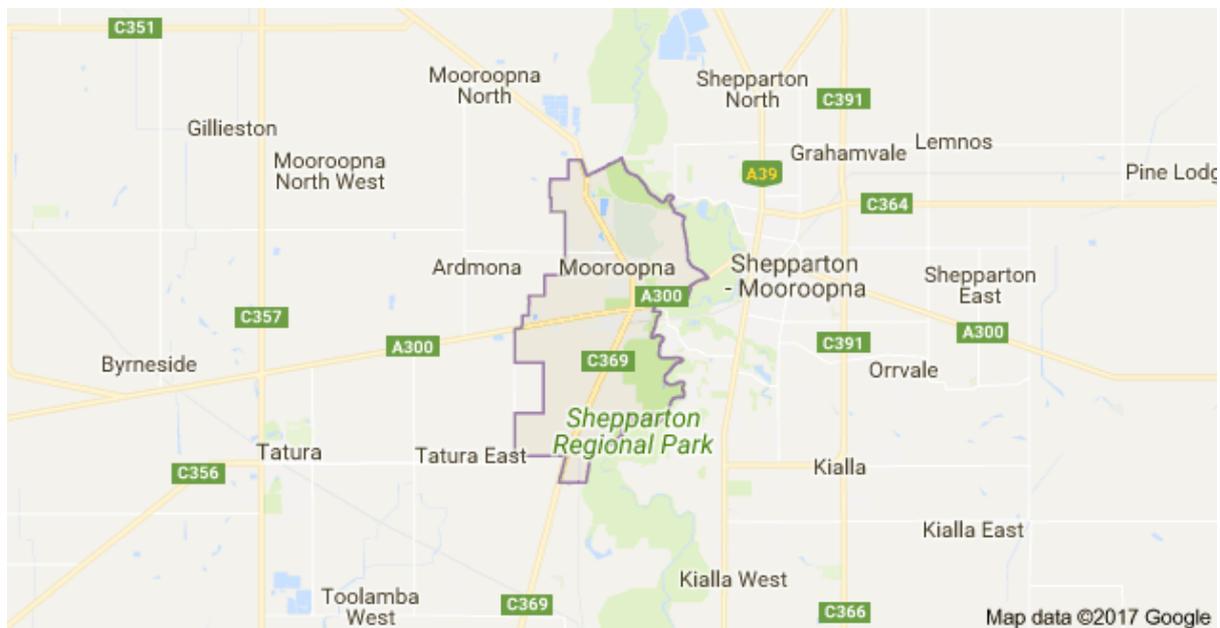
Women from the Shepparton Women's Employment Program (SWEP) were having trouble accessing family violence services during difficult times. They wanted to have the skills to support each other. Mooroopna is situated in the local government area (LGA) of Greater Shepparton where in 2015 the family violence rate was 342 females per 10 000 persons in comparison to the state average of 211 females per 10 000 persons (Women's Health Atlas, <http://victorianwomenshealthatlas.net.au/#/>). WHGNE conducted a literature review in 2006 for the basis of the 'Women Gathering' project that had the aim to equip women with the skills to go beyond each other's fences through mutual invitation into each other's lives (WHGNE p.3). The literature review had a rural lens, as rural women generally learn to keep their burdens private due to culturally constructed fear, shame, rural values and because of the impersonal and individualistic society where space is not given to discuss the more difficult things in their lives (WHGNE p.6). Women are carrying their burdens and can find themselves dealing with a silent foe. Some women call this foe loneliness, and others call it isolation (WHGNE p.6). In a context of supreme safety and trust, women can share and listen to each other, allow themselves to picture themselves in another woman's life and may find her burdens and experiences mirrored there. When this occurs, isolation vanishes. In order to achieve this openness,

women need a signal that it's okay to talk about the bad stuff. They also need to be listened to when they speak and what they say needs to be respected. They need to have a safe space to share (WHGNE p.14). These principles were applied to the *Women Gathering After Fires* project. Findings from the evaluation report:

- Provides opportunities for the power of storytelling and listening to heal, motivate, encourage and empower
- Empowers women and communities to be independent from service providers; it doesn't set up a dependence on workers
- Builds social capital, capacity and develop skills, such as leadership
- Uses a strength based approach acknowledging the resilience and skills of women and gives them an opportunity to blossom

The success of the Women Gathering After Fires project, provides a model of bringing women in rural communities together to meet in safe place where they have the opportunity feel connected with other women.

Where was the Project Conducted?



Project Aims:

1. Partners to collaboratively plan and hold workshop/s to increase knowledge, understanding about family violence and response skills for women involved in Shepparton Women's Employment Program (SWEP)
2. For the women involved in SWEP to increase their personal skills to develop through involvement in organising the workshops and be able to include skills gained and demonstrated on their resume
3. Build women's capacity and skills to have the confidence to gain more control of their own future and to provide a mutually supportive role for other community members

Timeframe

This project drew on existing resources and had the flexibility of not having a deadline. The project however aims for sustainable continuation through partnership of key organisations.

Services/Organisations Involved in the Project

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), The Salvation Army

People Involved in the Project

Julie Tyler - Health Promotion Officer, WHGNE

Ros Nam - Community Participation Goulburn, DHHS

Sharon - Shepparton Women's Employment Project, The Salvation Army

What was Done During the Project?

Activities: 22 meetings were held between 12/10/15- 27/07/16. Reflection sessions were held to evaluate the project's success.

Events: The following trainings were conducted:

- Children and trauma
- Bringing up great kids parenting program
- Tuning into teens
- Bystander training
- Courageous conversations
- Identifying Family Violence and Family Violence awareness training
- No Interest Loans Workshop
- Bystander Train the Trainer
- Facilitation

Relationships and partnerships:

- Participated in safety hubs design consultation held by the Department of Premier and Cabinet
- Meeting with the Department of Justice and Victoria Police to discuss their experiences with the system in Mooroopna

Evaluation: Feedback sheets were created at the beginning with the intent that the women would fill them out after each workshop. It was found there wasn't enough time to complete at the end of the workshop. The facilitators decided to have a reflective session with the women as they thought it would gain more valuable information.

Consultation: The facilitators took a community development approach with this group, working with the needs of the women. Initially women were unsure of a clear direction but with continued engagement and consultation, a purpose was established. By taking this approach the women were able to gain skills and understanding in areas they were interested in and they could use in their day to day lives and in the community. Patience is key to using a community participatory approach.

What Happened?

From the reflective recordings, these are the experiences from the women in the group:

Kate:

I think we all support each other, if we have something to say, each of us listens and everyone gives feedback, which I find vital. You don't have to hold back, you can speak quite candidly if you had to. We still are supported in our views, no view is judged wrong. We are each other's cheerleader. If someone does good, Sally having work I was so thrilled. Last time she came she said she was so tired, I said you will be alright! You can do it. I've definitely put the women's gathering group on my resume. It's empowering to me and then I can empower some other person. There's not enough of them [groups], so hearing that I got out there and I thought, I'm so proud, then you get knocked down and think, I'm just going to keep going, so I put that in there and the facilitators, training we did, I put that in there as well. I found with the bystander training that if I spot something not quite right I don't just sit on my hands, and let someone else deal with that. There was an incident at Coles, probably minor, it was like no I can't let that be. I'm doing aged care, just expanding myself, growth, personal growth, finding myself. I'm actually finding myself which I thought I wouldn't say 8 years ago, or 5 years ago. Definitely as a result of this group. It becomes personal too, but the group has helped with that personal, although you're personally growing the group is growing we are all growing together, I've seen heaps of changes in everybody. We were shy and timid [at the beginning], we are a pretty powerful group really, we are all individuals but it works. I had days [before this group] where I lost my marbles and everything, like who can I call on, I didn't want to call on any of the places that can help, because they would be more book based, textbook, that's what you need to do, that's not what I wanted, that wasn't the answer. So when I found this group, I was like yay! Finally.

Rachel:

With the participants and all of us are very supportive of one another, everyone's individual and has different needs, can express themselves in a different way, everyone listens respectfully and cares, and feels cared about. Julie and Ros are like sleepers of a garden bed, kept us in place and gave us somewhere to sit and gave us opportunities to grow not unlike a garden. So along with that, having extra opportunities to do trainings things like that kept us along guiding us, giving us some water when we needed it. We were able to express ourselves and bloom in our own ways and their support and experience and knowledge and the other people in the community that they know. Our own inner values of why we are here is because we care about people and community, about each other, we want the best for each other. All on a similar wavelength. I personally definitely have grown, with the training, I've got a job and was able to put the workshops on my resume. It just gives you a vast knowledge of all different sorts of things, also the community connections has provided so many connections they remember your face, conversation, I love networking, I really like being able to do because you never know when you're going to be able to help someone else though a connection. All that extra knowledge, within the group, almost a little counselling group ourselves supporting each other, if I'm on my journey I can return it to the group. I would like to see the group grow a bit, seeing more participants and be able to have more people involved. In saying that the small group, like you were saying the platform, it's where the basis, it would have been nice to see it expand a bit. Self-belief has been one of my worst things, and probably do even now, the

job I'm doing I still don't believe in my capabilities, this group has been part of that puzzle, it's been part of something quite strong and passionate and we as where I'm coming from, I look back at the beginning where we were. We have all grown and contributed all different sorts of aspects with Julie and Ros providing those learning things has been fantastic, and now can place myself outside my comfort zone. I just want to give back. A sense of belonging. That's powerful, because regardless of that club, it's a sense of belonging that gives you a sense of empowerment, respect, love, care as humans need. When I had the twins prematurely, I was isolated, I was alone. I had no one to help, I was lost but to have something like this, oh my god, even to call someone for help when family were non-existent, even something like that, this would have been empowering. You are safe to be you, safe place and everyone's respectful. As women we lose a lot. Probably what Lou just said, I think without you enabling us, providing the training for us, without having the support, I think we learn a lot, got a lot out of it, it's been extremely beneficial on all levels, it's been very interesting where I am working now they have boys and girls uniforms, you are aware of it [gender], the awareness is there. Sharing our knowledge, I did a talk that I wouldn't have been able to do, I did bring up what we talked about. Respect is the bottom line, even within our group, men respecting women and women respecting men.

Michelle:

I think there's a lot of encouragement, amongst us and to grow, we always speak positively of each other, there's no judgement from any of us, and we are all very well respected of each other and our voices as women. We always finding something new that we might not learn before. Julie and Ros you show us where we need to go, you are like the role models we like to be, having your knowledge and experience we can learn from you, I think it's a great little group. Everyone's free to say what they want to say, that's the important thing. There's no right or wrong. I think I can include this group on my resume, I think I've put a lot of time into this little group. I've also added the trainings we've done over the past 6 months. Which has been pivotal and I'm hoping to utilise in my current role [Shepp access], to see if I can start up a little program for women with disabilities in there. This is probably a great platform I think that is open to all women, it doesn't matter what stories they have, it's a place where they can come to if they want to talk about what's going on, they should be allowed to, knowing that we all have stories to tell, whether its family violence or cultural. It's a great group, that women can come and talk, people know about services, know how to support each other, we know how to listen, having an actual group to come to and the information we need to make sure that the information is safe and doesn't move outside the group, that would be the only thing that would deter them, I think it's a great platform. I've met a great group of women in this group and to see them blossom it's given me hope to a better edge. I've been able to use my skills and share with the women what I've learnt over the years, about personal development and professional development, and I think it's been good for me. I've made peace with some of my demons for myself as a result of this group, the family violence stuff and self-identity, I can talk about it without going to pieces, and this group gave me the opportunity to do that. I feel quite lucky been given the opportunity, I enjoy coming here, hearing everyone's stories, what everyone's doing. We can have fun, I think that's part of it to, we can lift each other up even if we are feeling crappy, amongst friends and support network is there to support each other and lift each other up. Have a laugh at ourselves. Life gets too serious.

Louise:

I felt that too [my life being different], I've worked for a while, but if I had those changes, like with the leadership group, the council and just deliberately putting myself in uncomfortable places. For me it's been my own personal growth, to also watch others and to give other women the opportunity to gain their own personal growth. It's like having our own gang. I've come from a pretty hard background, where you would consider these people to be a different level than yourself, but they are accepting of me, so you need to be more accepting and that makes you feel better. I can manoeuvre myself around here without feeling, like I'm inferior cos we know each other, if we share with each other what we've been through, it's not about how you were bought up, how much money you have or where you live, or how flash your house is, you're still basically you. We are in the same boat. The whole bystander training, that really stuck with me as well, there is always going to be inequality, just how the tiny things are still a big thing, I'm very conscious, I have cousins with nieces, it's the whole boy girl thing, if they want to do something, it doesn't mean they are gay.

Outcomes

As a result of this group:

- One of the women has gone on to study
- Two of the women have gained employment
- Two of the women are going to be continuing the group and take the facilitating role

Learnings from the Project

Reflections from Julie and Ros:

Community can be provided with skills.... Through trainings and meetings the women were able to learn about family violence and gender equity to make changes in the community and in their personal lives.

Provide positive feedback.... The women had a different interpretation of the project, in their reflection they didn't highlight all the work they had done organising the workshops and getting women from the community to come along. It was important to provide positive feedback to the women throughout the process.

'Their perspective was very different from ours'

Don't bring an agenda and expect it to be followed.... When meeting with the women, they would talk about what was happening in their lives, the facilitators didn't stop this from occurring as it was valuable to debrief. In the women's reflection, they talked about how they have healed from past experiences as a result of this group.

'A lot of time we talk their stuff, and they were story telling'

Progress felt slow.... The model used with this group resulted in a slow process, it felt not much had been achieved by the facilitators. Despite the feeling of the slow process, on reflection more had been accomplished. The women were driving the groups direction. They were given the power to make decisions.

'I've had to learn patience about it, patience of the process'

A reason to come along.... Having a purpose for the meetings was what got the women to come along and kept them coming along. What they really got out of the group was having a safe place to come to talk and offload. The women shared in their reflection a story of a time where they felt isolated and alone, if they had a group like this it would have made a big difference in their life.

It was low cost.... Some funding was attained from WHGNE, but the project was low cost. The community venue was free, catering was low cost and the trainings drew on existing funding. The facilitators tapped into existing organisation resources, which demonstrated the power of partnerships. Although funding was available for catering, the women choose to bring along their own food to the meetings.

‘Need intent and skill – not money’

Listening to their needs... At one point it became clear their children were their priorities. The facilitators heard this and organised an appropriate facilitator . The women met her and agreed for her to facilitate the parenting program.

*Skilled facilitators...*Julie and Ros were experienced facilitators who held the big picture. Even when the workshops went left of field, they were able to bring the women back to the vision.

‘Even though the idea changed, we are still holding the big picture, like empowerment and employment’

*Creating a safe place...*A place where there is trust and no judgement needs to be created in order for the women to share their stories. This was achieved through mutual understanding and agreeing that of what is shared does not leave the meeting.

‘I think that’s what they originally got out of the group, they wanted a space, a level of support, it’s not someone doing something for them or advocating for them, they just wanted a safe place to come to talk and offload’

Contact in group.. Having one of the women as a key contact of the group was vital to the success of the regular meetings. Sharon was employed at The Salvation Army, and it was part of her role to engage with the women. Being a key contact for the women and the facilitators was beneficial

*Having two facilitators...*It wasn’t until one of the facilitators was unable to attend a session that they realised how valuable it was for them both to be there. Their skills were complementary and they noticed different themes.

‘When we have been working independently is hasn’t been as effective’

*Debriefing....*The women shared their stories with the group and the facilitators found it important to debrief with one another, after the meetings.

‘Current and past situations they had experienced were heart breaking’

*Organisation support...*As the process was slow to begin with, it was challenging to know what the expected outcomes would be. Both facilitators had the support of their organisation in this piece of work.

‘Having the support of the organisation’

Where To From Here?

The facilitators Ros and Julie met with the two new facilitators to make a plan. The group has evolved and demonstrated it is ready to sustain itself. Many of the original members of the group have now moved on to work and study, due largely to their involvement in the group. This has been seen by the group as a strength and illustrated the value of the group. The two new facilitators have created a strong bond with each other and shared vision to take the group to the next stage. Julie and Ros see this as a key step in sustainability of the group. Julie and Ros will continue to support, if needed, through mentoring and coaching.